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# Restorative Practices and Discipline

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A trainer for the IIRP was consulting at an urban elementary school when a fight broke out in the cafeteria. The principal called him into the office and asked if he could help. The fight involved two fourth graders who were slapping each other. They had been separated by the staff and were now starting to calm down. The principal wondered if a restorative intervention was possible.

The trainer said to the principal, “Do you have to suspend these students?” She said, “Yes, if we call what happened a fight.” But the school was located in a rough neighborhood, and she didn’t see any benefit in sending the boys home for the day. She said she had some leeway, as long as she could be convinced that it would be safe for them to stay in the building.

The trainer and two teachers in the school, who were being trained to do restorative interventions, met with the two boys one at a time. They framed the situation by saying to the boys: “The question at hand is whether you are safe enough to be here. We need to know that ultimately you are not going to hurt yourselves or anybody else. The principal has said she will send you home

unless you can prove you can stay here. Are you willing to do that?” Both boys said they were.

The next step was to talk to each of the students about the incident itself. The trainer and two teachers asked each of the boys the restorative questions described in Chapter One. Although the boys struggled somewhat, each of them individually talked about what had happened and about how they thought they had affected others. Finally, the teachers said that in order to convince the principal the boys would be safe, the two boys needed to meet with each other to discuss the incident and come up with a plan to stop the fighting.

When they all sat down together, the adults asked the restorative questions again, now with the boys sitting together. The two boys were, in effect, both victims and offenders, so they each had a chance to respond to both sets of questions.

Apparently the two had been having a conflict for a long time. When asked, “How has that been for you?” they both talked about how hard it had been to keep the conflict going and that it was a tremendous weight on both of them. They said things like, “I’m so tired of it” and, “I’m exhausted.” The staff learned, too, that the boys were distant cousins and that the fight had started because of a conflict over a girl. As all these things came to the surface, the boys became increasingly serious and one started to cry. He said tearfully, “I used to be friends with you and I want to be friends again.”

The next step was for the boys to come up with a concrete plan. The trainer and the teachers said: “It’s not just enough to say you’re sorry. We want to know what you are going to do differently.” The boys were each given about 15 minutes alone to write down three things they could do to ensure this wouldn’t happen again. Once they agreed to and wrote the plan, they were ready to return to class.

Of course, the last time the class had seen the two boys in the lunchroom, they were fighting. Rather than let their fellow students snicker and wonder what happened, they organized a circle to publicly address the situation. The teacher of the class said:

“Everybody knows what happened. It was probably pretty scary to see these two boys fighting. But we want everybody to know the great work these two have done.” The two boys then told everyone how they talked things through and had come up with a plan to keep from fighting again. The teacher added: “Everybody in this class played into the situation in some way, so now we need to support them in keeping their commitment to avoid fighting. Can you each say one thing you can do to help out these boys?” One child said, “I know I egged you on, but now I’ll support you not fighting.” Everybody else said something during the go-around. By the end of the circle, the conflict was put to rest, and it has not resurfaced since then.

It might have taken a fair amount of time and effort to work with the two boys and the class. But teachers who use restorative strategies begin to see each conflict not as an inconvenience but as an opportunity for learning. If you take advantage of these teachable moments, students learn from each other’s problems and you begin to use less time and effort to achieve a safe and cooperative classroom. As the story of the two boys’ conflict demonstrates, the results can be remarkable.

This chapter focuses on the subject of discipline in general and therefore may seem on the surface to be more relevant to principals, vice principals, guidance counselors and other staff who deal with discipline problems for the whole school. However, many of the ideas presented here will help teachers and other staff to understand different aspects of restorative practices, why and how they work, and how they may be helpful with individuals and in the classroom.

### **Restorative Practices in Conduct**

The role of disciplinarian in a school offers unique challenges. The balance between holding children accountable and creating a positive environment for learning is sometimes difficult to achieve. Demands come from all directions. Teachers want to know “What

are you going to do about Johnny?” and “What is his punishment for what he’s done?” Johnny may want to be “cut a break” or in some way insulated from the consequences of his behavior. Johnny’s parents want “fairness” and a recognition that their child is not like “those bad kids.” Is there a way to satisfy these conflicting demands while still meeting the overall needs of the school community?

This chapter will address restorative interventions that can be used by school disciplinarians working with children of any age. There are three key points that need to be addressed first:

1. This chapter will focus on the disciplinarian’s role of responding to misbehavior. It will therefore focus on reactive strategies, although restorative practices is most successful when employed in an environment that implements proactive strategies as well. Schools that fail to build good relationships and a sense of community will find it more difficult to respond restoratively to problems when they arise. (See Chapter Three, which returns to the issue of creating a comprehensive restorative environment through proactive measures.) The restorative measures described in this chapter are sometimes first employed in discipline for extreme incidents and later filter down to everyday interactions.

2. The IIRP works with schools around the world that operate under different standards, rules, expectations and codes of conduct. This chapter will focus on what disciplinarians can do within their current structures. Restorative practices can be implemented regardless of these differences because they are not a set of rules but techniques and philosophies that can be applied in any context. Sometimes these practices readily substitute for traditional punitive responses, sometimes not. They may be used as a supplement to existing processes and serve as an additional option. This chapter covers strategies that can easily fit into existing systems. Still, it is our hope that as educators gain comfort and experience with restorative practices, they will recognize the diminished need for punishment as a response to misbehavior.

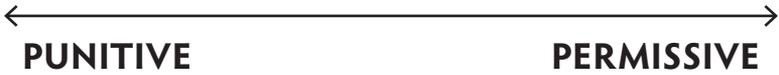
3. There is no list of “restorative consequences” in this guide.

That is because the list doesn't exist. If it did, we could write common offenses down the left side of the page and corresponding responses to each on the right. However, the very nature of restorative practices makes this impossible. A response that is restorative in one situation could be punitive or permissive in the next. Making a student clean a classroom is a common punishment. Cleaning a classroom might be perfect for a student who has already taken responsibility for making a mess of the classroom, feels bad and wants to make amends by helping to clean up the mess she caused. But the same punishment (or consequence) might make a different student resentful and still another feel like they'd gotten off easy, particularly if the punishment were perceived as having nothing to do with the misbehavior that led to that consequence.

The aim of restorative practices is to develop community and to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and relationships. The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is that human beings are happier, more cooperative, more productive and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them rather than *to* them or *for* them. The nature of the process, not the outcome, makes a response restorative or not.

## Social Discipline

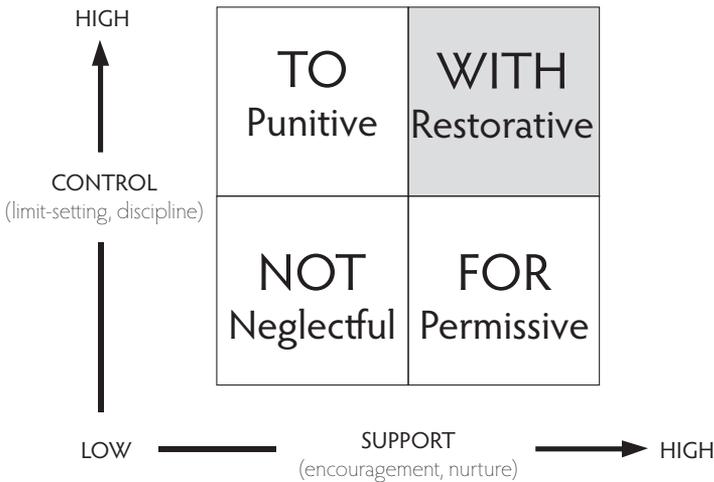
The benefits and problems of living in a society constitute a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we benefit from communal activity — trade, education, entertainment, sports, technology and culture. On the other hand, people living together have conflicts. Individuals see things differently from one another or fail to do the right thing or hurt one another. Laws and leaders are supposed to protect groups of people, mediate disputes and maintain order. As a microcosm of society, a school also needs rules and leaders who will carry out those functions. But in the face of increasingly challenging behavior in the form of incivility, misconduct, bullying and even violence, many schools are struggling to fulfill that societal obligation.



**Figure 4.** Punitive–Permissive Continuum.

We typically think of the range of possible responses of those in authority to misbehavior on a limited continuum. On one side are the punitive responses, strict and harsh, and on the other side are the nurturing and supportive responses, often labeled as permissive. Your parents, your teachers or other adults you knew as you grew up may have tended toward one end or the other of this “Punitive–Permissive Continuum” (see Figure 4).

The continuum illustrates how our society perceives the possible responses to wrongdoing. If we are not punitive, then we are permissive. There does not seem to be another option. The punitive response, which predominates in today’s schools, limits educational authorities to simplistic choices: to punish or not to punish. How much punishment? How many detentions or days of suspension? We assume that a failure to punish will lead to more unruly behavior and is therefore permissive.



**Figure 5.** Social Discipline Window.

In restorative practices we move beyond the single axis of the Punitive–Permissive Continuum. By examining the interplay between two axes, one for “control” or limit-setting and another for “support” or nurture, we discover additional possibilities.

The “Social Discipline Window” highlights the four resulting combinations (see Figure 5). High control with low support is punitive and high support with low control is permissive. These two combinations mirror the existing simplistic choice defined by the Punitive–Permissive Continuum.

A third response to wrongdoing combines low control and low support. This is the irresponsible or incompetent choice that characterizes a neglectful school or classroom where behavior has spun out of control and the adults have abdicated their authority and their responsibility.

The fourth response to wrongdoing combines both high control and high support. This is the critical choice that is missing on the Punitive–Permissive Continuum. This is when those in authority exercise their control, refusing to accept inappropriate behavior, but do so in a caring and supportive way. This is what we call a “restorative” response to wrongdoing.

The Social Discipline Window suggests that educators, or anyone in a position of authority, can take the best of both axes and achieve high levels of nurturing and support with high levels of expectation and accountability. The idea is to support students and engage them in finding ways to curb their own negative behavior.

By engaging with young people, we can hold them accountable in an active way. Then we are doing things *with* them. But when we simply hand out punishments, we are doing things *to* them. Or when we take care of their problems and make no demands, we are doing things *for* them. And when we ignore their behavior, we are *not* doing anything.

A growing body of evidence suggests that a restorative approach that engages and works with young people is the most effective and beneficial way for schools to respond to wrongdoing.

In determining what is restorative, we can assume that the less students are engaged in the process and the less they have to do, the less restorative the approach. The more they are engaged and the more they participate, the more restorative the approach.

Being lectured to by the principal or being given a detention or some other punishment requires no active participation on the part of the student who has misbehaved. In a sense, this is the easy way because it doesn't ask the student to do anything. Ironically, when you are restorative and engage students by asking questions and demanding that they help solve the problem, you will sometimes hear a student say, "Can't you just punish me?" Taking a scrutinizing look at one's own behavior and coming up with solutions to a problem they have created can be very difficult.

Adults also need to be self-reflective and keep in mind our purpose and intentions. It is not natural for many of us, nor is it easy, to always be restorative when dealing with conflict. Internal and external factors influence each of us. Fear can cause us to be more punitive or neglectful than we would like. Sympathy, a useful feeling, taken to the extreme, may cause us to be permissive. To be restorative, we need to pay attention to these types of feelings and correct ourselves. When we make mistakes, we should simply go back to those involved and address where we went wrong honestly and forthrightly.

A district leader confronted an assistant who arrived late to work by saying in a sour tone, "Late again? This better be the last time," and slammed her office door. When she realized she had lost her temper primarily because she felt overwhelmed by her work, she took a deep breath and opened the door. She asked the employee to talk with her to address the issue of being late for work directly rather than being backhanded.

So just what are we restoring? We are restoring those who have been harmed by the wrong. We are restoring relationships. We are restoring a sense of well-being and a feeling of community. Unless we accomplish that restoration, conflicts are left unresolved

— poised to repeat themselves again and again.

When students are punished, they usually see themselves as victims. They dwell on their own feelings and fail to reflect on the harm they have done to others. Sometimes they are forced to offer an apology, but because they have not had a meaningful exchange with those they have impacted, they lack empathy or insight into others' feelings. Punishment allows offenders to be passive and to avoid real responsibility for what they have done.

Of course, permissive responses also protect young people from responsibility and from facing the consequences of their actions. It is ironic that punishment and permissiveness are so similar in their failure to engage wrongdoers in a meaningful way.

Restorative responses, on the other hand, create opportunities for learning. Restorative processes solicit feelings from teachers, parents, school staff and other students so that an offender can understand the impact of their behavior. They must also help repair the harm and face up to the true consequences of their actions.

The goals of restorative practices that respond to wrongdoing include:

- › Fostering understanding of the impact of the behavior
- › Repairing the harm that was done to people and relationships
- › Attending to the needs of victims and others in the school
- › Avoiding imposing on students intentional pain, embarrassment and discomfort
- › Actively involving others as much as possible